

Civil War Sunken Ships

Legacy Resource Management Program

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During the latter half of May 1993, investigations into the history and current condition of two sunken Civil War vessels were undertaken by the Navy. The ships, USS *Cumberland* and CSS *Florida*, whose remains lie in the James River off of Newport News (VA), played significant roles in major events during the Civil War. Because of their historic significance, the shipwrecks have been determined eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. As the U.S. Navy retains stewardship over sunken naval vessels, the Navy applied for and received a grant through the Department of Defense Legacy Resource Management Program, a program established by Congress in 1991 to "promote, manage, research, and conserve any historical resources which exist on public lands, facilities, or property held by the Department of Defense."

The Legacy Grant, Project #348, was used to perform scientific underwater investigations of the wrecks in order to ascertain their current condition and to develop a comprehensive management plan in consultation with the Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Historic Resources for their long-term protection. Both wrecks were severely damaged prior to sinking; both were subject to salvage operations following the Civil War; both have been looted by illegal collectors; and both have been adversely affected by virtue of their location in a turbulent as well as busy commercial/industrial shipping lane. All these factors affect the current condition of the vessels and any long-term management goals. Panamerican Consultants Incorporated of Tuscaloosa, AL, was retained under contract with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Mobile District to complete the nec-

essary archival research and underwater reconnaissance to develop a series of alternatives for the preservation of data contained in the vessels.

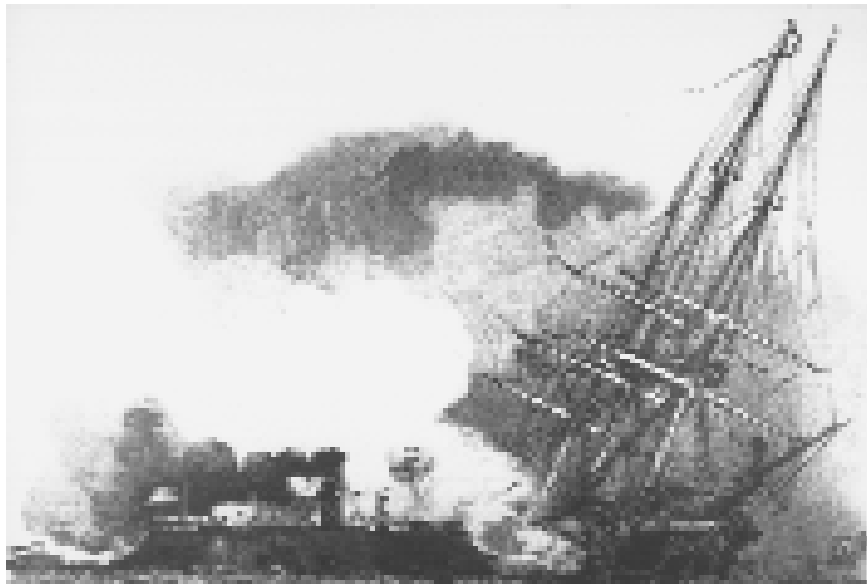
Historical Background

The CSS *Florida*, constructed in England as a commerce raider, was commissioned by the Confederate Navy in 1862. Following a two-year stint as one of the three most successful Confederate raiders, the ship was rammed by the USS *Wachusett* while anchored in the port of Bahia, Brazil. Failing to sink *Florida*, *Wachusett* towed *Florida* to Hampton Roads where the vessel sank in the James River under mysterious circumstances on November 28, 1864.

The wreck of the CSS *Florida* is significant for a number of historical reasons, including its representation of a segment of the Civil War that is not well known. While the land-based history of the Civil War is well documented, the battles on the seas were equally important in determining the course and duration of the war. Besides disrupting trade between the northern states and Europe, the Confederate raiders were able to capture merchant ships with cargos worth millions of dollars. This form of economic warfare reached beyond the battlefield and into the heart of the Union. Additionally, some of the car-

gos were sold to finance the Confederate war effort. *Florida* also offers a unique opportunity to examine technological change as it relates to the early use of steam propulsion in naval sailing vessels.

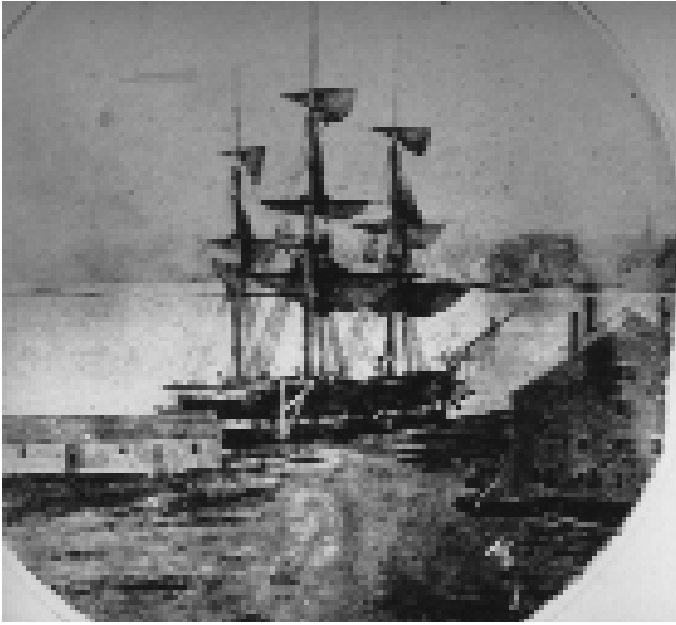
Florida used both sail and steam power and was fitted with a retractable screw propeller. The ship's design was developed for a specialized need during the Civil War, primarily speed and maneuverability in pursuit of northern



CSS *Virginia* (ex-USS *Merrimack*) rams the sailing ship USS *Cumberland* on March 8, 1862. This action marked the end of the wooden warship as a fighting instrument. Courtesy Hampton Roads Naval Museum.

merchant shipping. It is, therefore, an example of a style of ship that was representative of the technological changes precipitated by the War.

The USS *Cumberland*, on the other hand, was a full shipped-rigged sailing sloop, built at the Boston Navy Yard and launched in 1842. For the next 20 years, *Cumberland* served in the Mediterranean, the Gulf of Mexico, and along the African Coast. In 1861, *Cumberland* was in Gosport Navy Shipyard, and unlike the USS *Merrimack* which was burned and scuttled, she was evacuated to Fort Monroe. As Fort Monroe served as the staging area for blockading southern ports, *Cumberland* was deployed to Hatteras Inlet on the North Carolina coast prior to participating in the James River blockade.

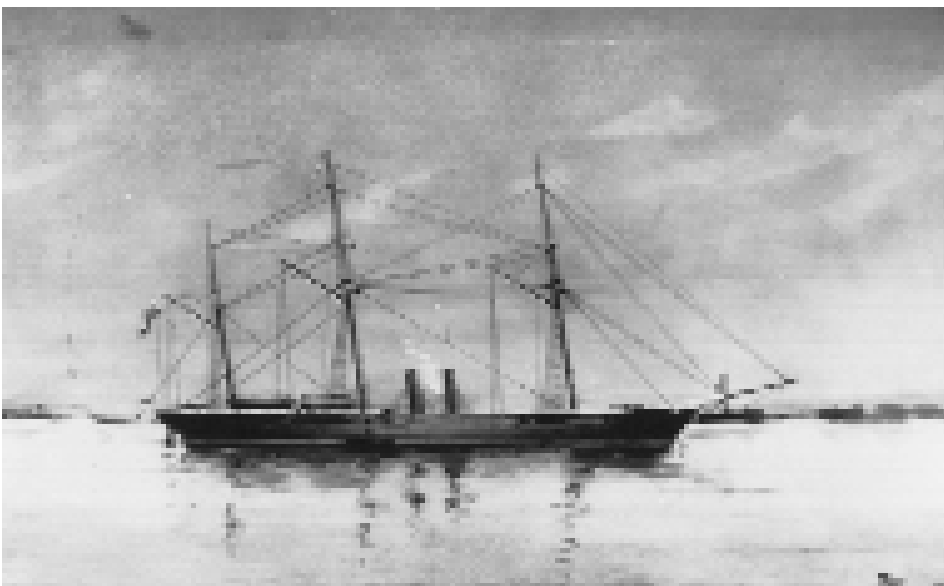


USS *Cumberland* (1842-1862), docked at the Portsmouth Navy Yard, New Hampshire, in 1860. In 1862 *Cumberland* was sunk by the CSS *Virginia* in Hampton Roads. This action marked the end of the wooden warship as a fighting instrument. Courtesy U.S. Navy.

The USS *Merrimack* was raised by the Confederate Navy at Gosport Navy Shipyard and refitted as an Ironclad. *Merrimack*, renamed the CSS *Virginia*, sailed forth on March 8, 1862, to clear the Union blockade. The USS *Cumberland* and the USS *Congress* were located off of Newport News, when the CSS *Virginia* entered the James River. *Virginia*, after exchanging fire with *Congress*, steamed toward *Cumberland* and rammed her under the starboard forechains.

The force of the engagement was severe enough to break off the six-foot ram of *Virginia* and open a hole in the side of *Cumberland* "wide enough to drive in a horse cart."

Cumberland rapidly sank with over 100 men aboard. The next day, the CSS *Virginia* was engaged in battle by



CSS *Florida* (1862-1864). This Confederate raider, built in England, terrorized Union shipping for two years before it was sunk in Hampton Roads. Drawing by Clary Ray. Courtesy U.S. Navy.

the USS *Monitor* in the famous "battle of the ironclads." It was believed by some that had it not been for the damage sustained by *Virginia* in her encounter with *Cumberland*, including the loss of her ram, she would have been successful in her battle with *Monitor*. Had *Virginia* been successful, the course of the war may have changed or its resolution may have been different. The significance of *Cumberland* rests in its role in a very famous event during the Civil War, an event that in some ways determined the outcome of the war.

Current Investigations

Underwater archeological investigations were undertaken between May 22 and 28, 1993. A number of successful dives, during which mapping, video documentation, and initial wreck site assessments were completed, also indicated that continuing damage has been sustained by both vessels. The damage noted was the result of intense maritime traffic, anchoring of vessels, fishing activities, as well as the natural erosional properties of strong currents and damaging marine organisms.

The current archeological investigations indicated that while the vessels have been subject to damaging forces of varying degree, the sites, long hidden by the dark and uninviting waters of the James River, still retain a wealth of archeological and historical information. The lower hull of *Florida*, all that remains of this once sleek and dreaded raider, now lies mostly buried in the mud and sand of the river bottom. Large pieces of steam machinery, and her oak ribs which project upward from the river bottom, are evidence that a major portion of the vessel along with artifacts representing shipboard life and the war she was engaged in, lie intact within and around her mostly disintegrated hull.

Similar to *Florida*, the remains of *Cumberland* lie mostly covered just a few hundred feet away. Unlike her lesser-known counterpart, *Cumberland* was heavily salvaged, with explosives employed to gain access to her hull. She, therefore, lies broken and scattered along the bottom, with large pieces of the vessel, such as hull sides and rigging components, projecting from the sands.

The results of the archival research and field investigations will be interpreted over the next few months and recommendations for the long-term management of these historic wrecks will be forthcoming.

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